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# A Life at the Company: Oral History and Sense Making

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RONALD KROEZE  
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This article explores the ways that oral history can help business historians to better understand how employees experience and make sense of their life at the company in relation to a company's identity. The research is based on two case studies. The first concentrates on Heineken. Specifically, it focuses on the closing of the Heineken brewery in Amsterdam in 1988. The second case was a commissioned project to write a book for the eightieth anniversary of the Amsterdam-based consultancy firm Van de Bunt Adviseurs. This project was concluded in 2016 with a publication that, like the research itself, was inspired by a cultural history approach and thus paid attention to founder narratives, sensemaking, and corporate identity construction. The article shows that oral history can broaden knowledge, especially of how employees experienced life at the company and how they made sense of it while referring to the (changing) company's identity. Through the oral history method, employees were given a voice that showed how the same events were (differently) experienced. Moreover, the oral histories made the personal impact of abstract developments more concrete, notably issues such as internationalization, mergers and acquisitions, changing working conditions, scaling up or down, or closure. Stories about the founders and the ample use of the family metaphor, which stood out in both cases, expressed employees' feelings of being part of a company with a specific identity, as well

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as a longing for it. The article concludes with several suggestions that should be taken into account when conducting oral history research.

## Introduction

This article explores the ways that oral history can help business historians to better understand how employees experience and make sense of their life at the company in relation to a company's identity. The research is based on two case studies. The first concentrates on Heineken, drawing from research conducted for the Heineken Collection Foundation, which aims to preserve and present the heritage of Heineken N.V. Specifically, it focuses on the closing of the Heineken brewery in Amsterdam in 1988. Strikingly, the closure is only mentioned indirectly and the employee perspective is nonexistent in histories such as *Heineken 1949–1988* (1991), *Brewery, Brand and Family* (2014), and *Heineken: The Brewery in Amsterdam* (2017).<sup>1</sup> This is consistent with Perk's remark that interviews are often regarded as supplementary to traditional sources while oral history that reflects on experiences of the interviewee(s) can easily be combined with a "traditional" organizational history.<sup>2</sup> For the Heineken case, interviews were conducted with ten employees who worked at the brewery or were involved in its closure.<sup>3</sup> All except one of the interviewees were retired. Unfortunately, no female employees were available to be interviewed.<sup>4</sup> While male interviewees do form a social cross-section of the company, from brewer to CEO, a female perspective could have provided a different viewpoint on gender, identity, and emotion in a predominantly male work culture.<sup>5</sup> However, in some cases, the wife of an interviewee joined the interview.

The second case on which this article is based was a commissioned project to write a book for the eightieth anniversary of the

1. Hageman, *Brewery in Amsterdam*; Van der Werf, Jacobs, and Maas, *Heineken 1949–1988*; Sluyterman and Bouwens, *Brewery, Brand and Family*, 326, 433, 534–536; see also Davids, review of *Brewery, Brand, and Family: 150 Years of Heineken*.

2. Perks, "Roots of Oral History," 215; Perks, "Business and Corporate Oral History," 42; Keulen and Kroeze, "Back to Business," 23.

3. For this article, all Heineken employees have been anonymized. The described positions might not be the positions they had at the start or end of their careers.

4. Traditionally, few women worked at breweries. In 1987, just before the closure, 433 men and 124 women worked at the Amsterdam brewery. Archive Heineken Collection Foundation, *Sociaal Jaarverslag 1987* (Annual Report on Social Issues 1987), 54.

5. Keulen and Kroeze, "Back to Business," 20, 23–24; Perks, "Business and Corporate Oral History," 41.

Amsterdam-based consultancy firm Van de Bunt Adviseurs. This project was concluded in 2016 with the publication of *Van de Bunt Adviseurs sinds 1933*, a book that, like the research itself, was inspired by a cultural history approach and thus paid attention to founder narratives, sensemaking, and corporate identity construction.<sup>6</sup> For the Van de Bunt case, interviews were conducted with ten employees who had worked at different levels at the company since its founding; they had worked in the back office, as a consultant, or as a partner at the firm. Moreover, the sons of two of the founders and the son of an influential senior partner were interviewed. Some participants were interviewed more than once. Three interviewees were female and seven were male. In addition to individual interviews, group interviews were executed; this was done partly in response to requests by some retired interviewees who feared not remembering events accurately if interviewed individually. Group interviews can stimulate discussion and raise new issues.<sup>7</sup> In addition, interviews with five former employees were used for this article; these had been conducted internally during a failed attempt to write a history of the company in 2008.<sup>8</sup> In both the Heineken and Van de Bunt cases, interview selection was also influenced by the snowball referral chain method, discussed by Matthew Bailey in this collection.

Although our work was separate,<sup>9</sup> our research was informed by the same ideas about the value of oral history, cultural history, and narratives to improve knowledge of business history. Moreover, we principally used oral history to explore how employees had experienced and made sense of their experiences at their respective companies in relation to what they saw as their company's identity. Our questions were consequently informed by insights from the life-history approach, which emphasizes the asking of relatively open-ended questions relating someone's personal biography to the specific subject of investigation (see the contribution by Janis Thiessen in this collection).<sup>10</sup> Rather than use oral history to confirm facts and figures, we used it to ask questions about the interviewees' background, how employees

6. Kroeze, *Van de Bunt Adviseurs sinds 1933*.

7. Perks and Thomson, *Oral History Reader*, 102.

8. Voice-recordings of these interviews are available in the Van de Bunt archive.

9. Jasmijn Vervloet was involved with the Heineken project, and Ronald Kroeze was involved with the Van de Bunt project. Vervloet's Heineken interviews occurred in 2017. Kroeze's interviews with former employees of Van de Bunt Adviseurs occurred in 2013 and 2014. Other cited Van de Bunt interviews are from the company archive as noted in note 8.

10. Rogers, Leydesdorf, and Dawson, *Trauma and Life Stories*; Walmsley, "Life History Interviews," 126–139. Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, is a good example of a life history approach; see also Von Plato, "Zeitzeugen und die historische Zukunft."

looked back on their time at their firms, what they remembered most clearly, and what emotional role their company played in their life. As oral history does not disregard traditional historical methods, we also examined source material as well as secondary materials pertaining to the companies' past.<sup>11</sup>

The interview materials for both studies contained two dominant themes. First, the employees frequently spoke about their company as a family. Second, the interviewees used the interviews to make sense of the changes they had experienced at their respective companies, which was often expressed in relation to this family identity. Both themes are analyzed below. We then conclude the article with a reflection on our methods.

### Making Sense of the Heineken Family

Historians Sluyterman and Bouwens acknowledge that the Heineken family was determined "to maintain a decisive influence" in the firm, but they fail to illustrate how.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, it is often suggested that at Heineken, and especially at the Amsterdam brewery, employees were like a family, yet no detailed information is provided.

The interviewees offer an insight into what it meant to be a family. A former porter who spent his whole career at Heineken, explained: "We always [...] took care of each other. And ... that just worked out well." His wife, who sat next to him during the interview, added: "Yes, if someone's wife was in the hospital, colleagues would say: 'Go to your wife, I will cover for you.' And then maybe after a few years you'd return the favour. That was just what you did." The former porter added: "Amongst each other, it was just like family. Because [...] you could count on each other."<sup>13</sup> One former laboratory employee stressed that Heineken taught him how social interactions worked, and that the brewery was like "a small village" where everyone knew each other.<sup>14</sup> A former employee of the promotion and advertising service stated: "I would sometimes say, my blood is green. [...] You know, everybody had green blood here. Day and night, they would just have to give us a

11. There are several books on Heineken. Van de Bunt's early history has been analyzed in studies on the origins of consultancy in the Netherlands. See Hellema and Marsman, *De organisatie-adviseur*; Van der Velden and Wachtmeester, *100 jaar organiseren*.

12. Davids, review, *Brewery, Brand, and Family: 150 Years of Heineken*.

13. Vervloet, interview, former porter and his wife, Heineken, April 2017.

14. Vervloet, interview, former laboratory employee, Heineken, April and May 2017.

call and we'd come. But that's completely different nowadays."<sup>15</sup> Stories about the brewery connect employees through time.<sup>16</sup> Even today, employees of the Heineken experience often comment that the brewery remains a highly social place.

However, they also made sense of their experiences in other ways. Sensemaking can be related to how certain individuals are able to persuade others to think as they do.<sup>17</sup> Freddy Heineken, the grandson of the founder, and CEO and president from 1971 to 2002,<sup>18</sup> played an important role in this process. Most informants referred to interactions with "Mr. Heineken," and some held him personally responsible for employee well-being. A former laboratory employee remembered Freddy Heineken's visits to the brewery: "Those kinds of things were just nice for the employees, you know, people just found that very important."<sup>19</sup> A former employee of the promotion and advertising service explained: "I spoke to him a couple of times. He always called me: 'Hey, Gray!' My hair had been gray since forever. 'Hey, Gray!' 'Ah, Mr. Heineken,' I would respond while serving him a drink."<sup>20</sup> Later in the interview, he explained that Mr. Heineken took care of the employees and that things changed when Heineken died: "Then they [the new board of directors] could do as they pleased."<sup>21</sup>

A former CEO recalled walking with Mr. Heineken through the bottle unit at the brewery in Zoeterwoude: "He [an employee] came towards Mr. Heineken, and said: 'Sir, sir, will you make sure that this gentleman [referring to the former CEO] takes care of us, as well as you always did?'" The former CEO continued: "And that is just image, because Freddy Heineken was never involved in human resources. He just did not want to be involved in those situations." The former CEO expressed that accolades were often incorrectly attributed to Mr. Heineken owing to "the mysticism" surrounding him.<sup>22</sup> Such accounts shows how stories about Freddy Heineken played a role in making sense of a change at the top (a new CEO) with (a fear for) actual changes in social policy and on the work floor.<sup>23</sup>

15. Vervloet, interview, former brewer, Heineken, May 2017.

16. Maclean et al., "Living Up to the Past," 544.

17. Maitlis and Christianson, "Sensemaking in Organizations," 96.

18. In a legal sense, his father is probably not the biological child of Gerard Heineken.

19. Vervloet, interview, former laboratory employee, Heineken, April 2017.

20. Vervloet, interview, former brewer, Heineken, May 2017.

21. Vervloet, interview, former employee of the promotion and advertising service, Heineken, May 2017.

22. Vervloet, interview, former CEO, Heineken, March 2017.

23. Maclean et al., "Living Up to the Past," 561.

## Making Sense of the Closure of the Heineken Brewery

Although the research primarily focused on the closure of the Heineken brewery in Amsterdam in 1988, most interviewees expressed that the merger of Amstel and Heineken in 1968 had a bigger impact. More than half of the interviewees had worked for Amstel before joining Heineken. Heineken and Amstel had always been competitors, and the workforces were loyal to their respective companies. Literature on sensemaking suggests that mergers cause confusion and trauma among employees.<sup>24</sup> The former porter expressed that the merger was emotional, especially for the older employees of Amstel: “They [the employees] thought it was terrible and didn’t understand why the merger was necessary. And that is all you hear, but they continued working, of course.” His wife added: “Well, you just have to say it! There was a lot of hurt, we have been through a lot.” The porter added: “The employees didn’t understand it as Heineken and Amstel had always been competitors and they could not understand being merged now.” The Amstel employees tried to make sense of this merger, or reconcile their emotions during this time, by expressing their pain yet paying respect to Amstel. Several former Amstel employees would see the closure of the Amstel brewery in 1983.

The traumatic merger of Amstel and Heineken influenced the ways employees made sense of the closure of the Heineken brewery in 1988. When asked about this event, the former porter stated: “We did not talk about it really, not a lot anyway.” His wife added: “Well, people had gone through a lot. You worked at a certain department, and that was closed down. If you were lucky, you got another job and then they closed that one as well! That hurts, that hurts a lot.”<sup>25</sup> After the closure, employees could retire or move to the new brewery in Zoeterwoude. However, there were different perspectives on this episode. The former CEO stated that the closure and the move to Zoeterwoude went quite smoothly. When asked if there were any protests he responded: “No, very little. Look, the Amsterdam employees expected more or less that the brewery was going to be closed. Part of the employee base was transferred to Zoeterwoude [...] and some employees went into early retirement.” Far from being a problem, the transition was described by this former CEO as “quite hot.” He explained, “Everybody seemed to like it. Zoeterwoude is not that far from Amsterdam, the facility was very modern and the hustle and bustle was there; in Amsterdam nothing was happening

24. Maitlis and Christianson, “Sensemaking in Organizations,” 77.

25. Vervloet, interview, former porter and his wife, Heineken, April 2017.



anymore.”<sup>26</sup> Clearly, this was not the case. Such discordant views support Hollinshead and Maclean’s claim that, through asymmetrical power relationships, there is always an implied separation of status between different levels—from managers to the workforce—that can create contrasting perspectives about the same event.<sup>27</sup> These differences are notably absent from the existing business histories on Heineken.<sup>28</sup>

Although the conditions significantly improved, these positive changes were overshadowed by the loss of atmosphere. An example is the cleaning of the lager tanks at the Amsterdam brewery. The brewers had to climb into these tanks to clean them. The tanks were located in cellars where temperatures were kept around -5 degrees Celsius. One former brewer described a specific cellar: “It was a complete disaster, cellar 10. Lager tank above lager tank, oh my God [...]. Oh, it was a complete disaster to get in the upper tank. With planks and climbing. Ahh!”<sup>29</sup> A former brewer stated that even though Zoeterwoude was more comfortable because the brewery was automated, he nevertheless missed the “*gezelligheid* [cosiness] of Amsterdam.”<sup>30</sup> A former laboratory worker stated: “You plainly came into ... well you simply were in a factory.”<sup>31</sup> A former managing director expressed similar sentiments: “When walking around, you hardly saw anyone there. For example at the beer repository in Zoeterwoude, where—let’s say—twenty forklifts drive around without anyone driving [them]. That just drives you mad.” For most informants, Zoeterwoude lacked the familial character. The former CEO, however, identified a different cause. Rather than focusing on the closure of the brewery, he identified the impact of the internationalization of the Heineken firm:

When you place an employee from the French or Greek Heineken department in Amsterdam, a less stable culture will be formed ... as the time necessary for a culture to form itself is no longer available. So philosophically speaking there is a culture but this culture has much less influence on the decision-making process concerning the human element in the company than it used to have. [The culture] nowadays is much more like loose sand than it used to be [...]. This company used to be a real family. [For example] people used to call each other at night when a light-advertisement was not working and say: “Gee, you really have to do something about it, you cannot keep it like that.”<sup>32</sup>

26. Vervloet, interview, former CEO, Heineken, March 2017.

27. Hollinshead and Maclean, “Reaching Distant Parts,” 100.

28. Maitlis and Christianson, “Sensemaking in Organizations,” 78.

29. Vervloet, interview, former brewer, Heineken, June 2017.

30. Cosiness does not convey the same meaning, but it comes the closest. Vervloet, interview with former brewer, Heineken, June 2017.

31. Vervloet, interview, former laboratory employee, Heineken, April 2017.

32. Vervloet, interview, former CEO, Heineken, March 2017.



Such comments again illustrate how interviews can contribute to a broader understanding of the impact of change on identity and culture.<sup>33</sup>

Strikingly, although the merger, closure, and move had a deep impact on the interviewees' lives, they all stated that they would work at Heineken again if given the chance. This exemplifies the loyalty of the informants toward the family and the company. The interviews gave agency to the employees to express their views and provided a multilayered perspective on their lives at the company.<sup>34</sup>

### Making Sense of the Van de Bunt Family

Unlike Heineken, which was a family-founded business, Van de Bunt Adviseurs was founded by four men. Focusing on consultancy, it never had more than fifty employees throughout its history. Even so, the family metaphor was omnipresent in the interviews. Wim Kuyken, one of the interviewees, was the son of a senior partner who had worked at the firm from 1940 until 1977, explained:

The professional activities of my father continued at our home. There, we often discussed the company's well-being at the kitchen table. And this was not only the case at our place. Formal and informal meetings of the partners were also organised at the houses of the partners. [...] The Van de Bunters were a family and their children were a natural part of it. I remember we went on holiday with the family Colthof [another senior partner], it seemed as if we were one family. [...] Our personal involvement with the office was serious. But that was true the other way around as well. When my father died in 1979, the firm maintained the relationship with my mother until she passed away in 1999. That is something we as a family have really appreciated.<sup>35</sup>

Being part of the Van de Bunt family also caused tensions. Peter Starreveld, the son of founder Wim Starreveld, reflected on the impact of his father's decision to leave and become a partner at an accountancy firm in 1950. During the interview, he tried to make sense of the whole affair and why his father had left in the first place: "Well, I think, because his heart had always been with accountancy and my father was an impatient man, an entrepreneur, he left when things worked to start something new." He also mentioned the inconveniences his

33. Perks, "Business and Corporate Oral History," 41.

34. Ibid., 42–43; Keulen and Kroeze, "Back to Business," 24.

35. Kroeze, interview, Wim Kuyken, son of a senior partner, Van de Bunt, March 14, 2014.

father encountered when the Starreveld family and the Van de Bunt family met shortly thereafter: “Henk van de Bunt was not happy with my father’s decision because they had begun together and my father’s clients were important for the company.” He also mentioned the difficult times the Starreveld family encountered because of his father’s decision: “I remember we had to be thrifty because there was less income.”<sup>36</sup>

As at Heineken, being a family was also strongly linked to the company culture. At his retirement party in 1980, the head of the back office, Jan Ockhuijsen, characterized the company as a “gentlemen’s office.” In his speech, he explained: “You did not call a partner by his first name. [But] they did say Jan to me.” He continued that Mr. Van de Bunt could ask very personal questions, which showed him that Van de Bunt was a friendly and caring man. Such questions, he mused, could equally make Jan’s wife and other colleagues feel uncomfortable. He also stated: “And Van de Bunt’s wife had herself decided to visit every new child of the Van de Bunters that was born in the Van de Bunt-family. Furthermore, new employees could expect a home visit to get know each other,” or—as he added—“to be examined.”<sup>37</sup> In another interview, a former consultant remembered that Henk van de Bunt always paid attention to the way staff tied their ties. He also recounted a colleague’s response to his question on why Henk van de Bunt never drove his own car but often took the train or a taxi: “Because that is not possible. If you put Henk behind the wheel, he only pays attention to whether the man in the street has neatly pressed trousers.”<sup>38</sup> Hans Colthof, who began as a junior consultant in 1952 and was a senior partner between 1962 and 1993, remembered he once asked Henk van de Bunt what it actually meant to be a consultant. His answer: “A hardworking gentleman’s life.”<sup>39</sup>

Hence, these employees made sense of their experiences in relation to Henk van de Bunt’s formal (for some paternalistic) style and the firm’s culture of taking care of each other. Colthof also remembered that this style opened doors to customers. He was introduced by “gentleman” Henk van de Bunt to the world of finance, and would obtain important orders from there throughout his entire career.<sup>40</sup> In addition, being a paternalistic gentleman meant being a father figure to the employees, especially the junior consultants and members of the back office. Several interviews recounted anecdotes about Henk

36. Kroeze, interviews, Peter Starreveld, son of founder, and René van Leeuwen and Theo van Oers, Van de Bunt, April 18, 2013.

37. Archive Van de Bunt, “Kroniek afscheid Ockhuijsen,” 9 and 10.

38. Archive Van de Bunt, interview, Wim van Dijk, former consultant, 2008.

39. Archive Van de Bunt, interview, Hans Colthof, retired senior partner, 2008.

40. Ibid.

van Bunt: how he talked as easily with the typist as with the senior partners, and the way that people from outside the company were surprised by his familiarity.<sup>41</sup> For later generations, this value was linked to the fact that the firm, through to today, takes care of its younger employees, as two current partners explained.<sup>42</sup>

### Making Sense of Van de Bunt's Independence

Former and current employees were intrigued that Van de Bunt had avoided either selling to or merging with another consultancy firm. Van de Bunt Adviseurs remains the oldest, still independently operating consultancy firm in the Netherlands. Interviewees tried to make sense of this in the interviews by telling several stories. One revolved around McKinsey & Co., which had approached Van de Bunt in the 1960s. Hans Coltof, a retired senior partner recalled this and the conversations surrounding it:

Look, we earned a decent income but we had not become rich. That is no big deal, but the possibility was there. On a certain moment McKinsey proposed to buy us. A lot of money was involved. So, we discussed, "Shall we do it?" We were invited by McKinsey's directors to come to Denmark. In a fancy castle they made us a very good offer. We left to think about it but in the airplane nobody said a word. I was the youngest partner, so I carefully asked one of the senior partners: "What do you really think of it?" He did not respond, nothing was decided, and everyone went home. A week later I asked him again: "So, what has been decided?" He responded: "Oh well, I discussed it with Gijs [another senior partner], I am not interested and nor was he, and you all weren't really enthusiastic as well, so I have told McKinsey we won't do it." And that's how these things were decided back then.<sup>43</sup>

The final decision and the pride surrounding Van de Bunt's independence obscures that this partner, along with several others, remained unconvinced because of the low level of discussion, which was the rationale behind declining McKinsey's offer.

More offers would be turned down in the 1970s. Archival sources indicate that some partners believed the firm would be swallowed by another firm or go bankrupt. However, they also illustrate that this

41. Archive Van de Bunt, interview, Wim van Dijk, 2008.

42. Kroeze, interviews, Ila Kasem, partner and current managing director, and Maikki Huurderman, current partner, Van de Bunt, March 2014.

43. Archive Van de Bunt, interview, Hans Coltof, 2008.

period was decisive in constructing the firm's identity. In the formal and archaic language used at Van de Bunt in those days, which is visible in the archival sources, the partners tended to agree that "the framework [of the firm] of being a federative group of professionals based on free cooperation" was preferable to a merger.<sup>44</sup> Some interviewees, such as Peter Starreveld, saw this "beautiful formula as a cover up for the more crude idea: everyone is free to do what he likes ... they were just not willing to give up their freedom ... and their weirdness."<sup>45</sup>

Van de Bunt remained independent, but it also remained a rather small company in comparison with other consultancy firms. This decision affected the kind of advice that could be offered: small-scale projects in which only one or a few advisors were involved for relatively short periods. Over the years, Van de Bunt's structure as a small, loosely organized group of independent operating consultants that executed small-scale advisory projects increasingly informed the ways that the firm was perceived: employees spoke about it as the company's identity. As Jan den Hollander stated in a 2008 interview:

Van de Bunt has never been a standard consultancy firm [like one of the big firms]. I think we offered good advice. That is not so original, but our advice was not two a penny. That is because our approach was attached to the person of the consultant. Those persons had their own professional networks. ... We worked in close cooperation with the top management [of our clients]. We worked in small groups. And due to this small-scale cooperation, our consultants developed new perspectives.<sup>46</sup>

The current managing director Ila Kasem expressed similar sentiments when stated: "It has become part of our DNA to be dedicated to operating in freedom in a world of big consultancy firms. I see it also as my task to keep Van de Bunt viable as an independent firm, in line with our history going back to our founders ... who had a vision of doing it differently."<sup>47</sup>

From this viewpoint, the behavior of the founders and the (irrational) decisions of the partners in the past seem to make much more sense.

44. Archive Van de Bunt, "Kroniek Afscheid Jan Ockhuisen," 12.

45. Kroeze, interviews, Peter Starreveld, René van Leeuwen, and Theo van Oers, Van de Bunt, April 18, 2013.

46. Archive Van de Bunt, interview, Jan den Hollander, retired senior partner, 2008.

47. Kroeze, interviews, Ila Kasem and Maikki Huurderman, Van de Bunt, March 2014.

## Concluding Remarks

Oral history can broaden knowledge, especially of how employees have experienced their life at the company and how they make sense of it while referring to the (changing) company's identity. Through the oral history method, employees were given a voice that showed how the same events were (differently) experienced. Moreover, the oral histories made the personal impact of abstract developments more concrete, notably issues such as internationalization, mergers and acquisitions, changing workings conditions, scaling up or down, or closure. Stories about the founders and the ample use of the family metaphor, which stood out in both cases, expressed employees' feelings of being part of a company with a specific identity, as well as a longing for it.

The oral historian can also help to structure chronologically those important events that help the interviewee tell his or her story. In our individual projects, we experienced the importance of being well-prepared on account of fading memories, especially in relation to specific dates, which at times sparked confusion or irritation during some interviews. As one interviewee uttered while trying to remember a specific date: "Those dates, that is just really terrible."<sup>48</sup> Having background information available also helped interviewees to gain trust in us as dedicated interviewers.

We each encountered strong emotions, as many interviewees were not used to talking about their personal experiences during their professional careers. Interviews are therefore not only liable to a form of self-censorship but also to the opposite<sup>49</sup>: a person can become so emotional that it seems as if his or her life at the company was one big emotional rollercoaster. A life-history approach therefore enhances business historians' capacity to gain knowledge of someone's "entire" life at the company and to put those strong emotions into perspective.

Finally, we each experienced that group interviews have the advantage that people can stimulate each other; indeed, in the case of Van de Bunt, they did.<sup>50</sup> However, a noteworthy disadvantage could be discerned in the ways that participants in these interviews related to one another during interviews. Some struggled to let go of the old hierarchical relations, which made some former employees more comfortable than others to tell their stories. Overall, internal and external power structures, self-perceptions, social environments, and life experiences should not be underestimated in how they shape memories and influence the stories that are told. These aspects should be taken into account when conducting oral history research.

48. Vervloet, interview, former managing director, Heineken, May 2017.

49. Perks, "Business and Corporate Oral History," 49.

50. Perks and Thomson, *Oral History Reader*, 102.

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